

Beech Mountain Hillclimb

May 19-21 2000

Best Beech Mountain Hillclimb Yet

(Beech Mountain, NC) – The fifth running of Central Carolinas Region/SCCA Beech Mountain Hillclimb proved to be the best yet, by far. More cars, more spectators and better weather made everyone from event organizers to the local Chamber of Commerce happy that they made some changes to this enduring race to the clouds. Among those changes were moving the date three weeks later in the year and involving sponsors which contributed to the purse.

Seventy-nine drivers from nine states answered the call to the start line at the Ski Beech resort. About half of the cars made preliminary runs on Friday, May 19 in near perfect weather including the Grassroots Motorsports project car, the Ro-Spit. Rivalries quickly developed in several classes. In ESP, it looked like Saturday night at the dirt track as Jay Marlowe (PontiacTrans-Am), Brian Gause (Camaro Z-28), and Larry Kilgore (Ford Mustang) blasted up the snaking 1.4 mile road just milliseconds apart. Marlowe ended the day breaking his own year old record with a run of 85.072 secs. Local driver Scott Mayes (Toyota Corolla) swapped the lead in ITC a couple of times with Marshall Garland (Datsun 510) until Mayes posted a 97.882 secs. time that Garland could not answer.

With eight cars, the SPO group was the largest of the event, dominated by American muscle cars and the surprisingly quick Ro-Spit. While Rick Shafer was clearly the man to beat in his Trans-Am, Steve Eckerich hustled the project car up the hill embarrassing several Corvettes and Mustangs with a best time of 78.707secs. In what proved to be the final run of the day, Eckerich lost the handle near the high-speed finish line and impacted a low wooden wall. The right front suspension crumpled but willing hands and plenty of spares got the Ro-Spit ready for Sunday's final runs for the money.

Another crowd-pleasing group was Team Underdog contesting the SSC trophy. Brothers Mitchell and Heyward Wagner, and Scott Sawyer, all in Honda Civic Si's, battled each other and the mountain for the day's bragging rights. Heyward finally emerged the leader over interloper Craig Fogleman with a clocking of 96.003 secs.

Saturday's contests proved equally interesting. Headliners for the day were veteran hillclimbers John Finger and Mike Green, who own 15 Chimney Rock Hillclimbs between them. Finger showed up at the controls of the 1992 Ford Thunderbird driven by Jeff Gordon in Busch races.

Green answered with a 1989 Pontiac Grand Prix last driven by stock car great Buddy Baker. Finger demonstrated that he has lost none of his hillclimbing skills by hustling the massive stock car up the steep grade in 80.499 secs., more than 2 seconds faster than Green. Neither, however, could touch the 72.623 secs time posted by northeastern hillclimb specialist Ron Moreck.

Other classes created excitement among the spectators scattered along the grassy viewing areas. In ASP, Vicki Eckerich (Mazda RX-7) chased Rock Webb (Porsche 911T) most of the day then posted a stunning 88.080 secs. run, breaking her own record. Datsun 240Z drivers Darryl DesMarteau and Bill Coffey wrestled for the lead in GT2 with DesMarteau coming out on top.

So far the Beech Mountain Hillclimb had fulfilled every promise – lots of track time, great weather and an appreciative audience. But by Sunday, the luck began to run out. Clouds descended on Beech Mountain, cooling the asphalt and bringing the prospect of rain. Most competitors hurried to get in a good run or two before the lunch break. Twelve drivers turned in their personal best runs of the weekend on Sunday morning including Walter Fields (ITB BMW 320i) and Jonathon Starnes (SSX Acura Integra) who set new records in their respective classes.

The rain finally came during the lunch break and many drivers elected to pack up and head down the mountain. By the end of the day, just ten hard-core drivers were left to entertain the equally hardy spectators. Those who remained were treated to the continuing battle among the "Honda kids" of Team Underdog though only Mitchell Wagner was able to better his pre-rain time.

At the end of the day, eleven drivers walked off with some cash including nine who set new class records. Special payoffs went to Rick Shafer for the fastest time on Friday, Ron Moreck for fastest time on Saturday and overall, and Team Underdog for the Worker's Choice award. Shafer and Team Underdog promptly donated their winnings to the local Fire Department to help purchase a new heart defibrillator.

This year's edition of the Beech Mountain Hillclimb proved what can be done to make a low-key event into a spectacular happening. Increased advertising and public relations drew more spectators than ever before. The addition of a purse and the prospect of better weather attracted more and better cars than in the recent past. In fact, the only complaint heard all weekend was, "I can't see anything for the leaves on the trees." This unique event should be on everyone's to do list next Spring whether you want to test your skill and courage against the mountain or just enjoy a weekend vacation. Hillclimbing is alive and well in the South.

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